

---

# Quick Tips for Teaching Students How to Reflect

JENNIFER DOBBS-OATES

*Purdue University - West Lafayette*

The theme of the 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference hosted by the National Society for Experiential Education was “Hindsight is 20/20: Using Reflection for Assessment, Program Excellence, and Student Success.” Inspired by that theme, I contemplated my own use of reflection as part of my college teaching for more than a decade. In the first few years, I noticed a problem. What students turned in often fell short of what I was expecting. These were reflections that were not really reflections.

I found myself saying the same things over and over again in feedback to students. “Dig deeper,” I’d say. “Tell me more.” “Why is that?” “How did you know?” “Give me an example.” The reflections students turned in were often shallow rather than deep, vague rather than specific, and descriptive rather than reflective. I finally came to a realization: if I want my students to reflect effectively, I have to teach them how!

## **Description of the Practice & Connection to the Research**

Now, I regularly set aside half of a class period (approximately 25 minutes) at the beginning of the semester to explicitly teach about reflection. During class, we talk about *what* reflection is,

*why* we do it, and *how* to do it well. I’ve seen improved reflections from students as a result. This paper will share some tips that you can use to help students understand how to reflect effectively.

Begin with the *what* of reflection. First, ask yourself “what does reflection mean in the context of my course or program?” I recommend finding out what your students already know as well. I ask my students, “What is reflection? Is it different from recall? Analysis? Critical thinking?” Once you have a sense of where your students are starting from, you will better understand what they still need to know.

Second, present a definition of reflection and get your students to break it down into its key components. There are many definitions of reflection from which you can choose. I use some short excerpts from John Dewey’s writing on reflection in *How We Think*. Since the language is a little challenging for students because it doesn’t feel contemporary, I find it works well to ask students to start from the original and translate it into something that sounds more modern to their ears. Since they are picking out the key ideas and rephrasing them in their own words, this results in them pro-

cessing the information at a deeper level.

Some of the key characteristics of reflection my students consistently notice are that reflection is active and intentional, that reflection is repeated and extended over time, and that reflection is careful and thoughtful. Often, it falls to me to mention that reflection involves connecting ideas to evidence and to conclusions as well.

Next, I recommend teaching about the purposes of reflection. Let your students know *why* you use reflection as a part of your course or program. When we are transparent about course design and tell our students why they will be asked to do certain things, students' motivation tends to improve (Anderson et al., 2013). I share three primary purposes of reflection with my students. The first is that reflection promotes learning. When you have an experience, you may learn from it. Learning from experience happens to us all the time. But, of course, we also have plenty of experiences we don't learn from. When you have an experience followed by a reflection, it is more likely to lead to lasting learning (Ribeiro et al., 2019). Second, I emphasize why we use weekly reflections in the course. I point out that repeated reflections help to generate momentum and help students to make connections among experiences. Each reflection builds on the one before it, so, by reflecting in-between each experience, we support growth and learning over time. Finally, I share with students that reflection is both a life skill and a career skill. It is not just something to use in a course and then leave behind.

Especially since the students I teach are pursuing careers in social services and education, reflection will be a tool they can use throughout their careers to shape their practice and better serve the clients and students they are supporting (Ryding & Wernersson, 2019).

Now that you've covered the *what* and *why* of reflection, it's time to teach them the *how*. There are several ways to do this. Options include getting students to construct their own process for reflecting effectively, teaching your students about an established model of reflection, and developing your own model.

Having students construct a process for themselves is valuable because it can help them tailor a reflection process to fit their individual needs. If you would like to do this, start with the key characteristics of reflection your students identified when you were defining reflection. Ask them what steps they would need to take to reflect in that way. My students come up with many ideas, but they most often emphasize the need to stop other activities so one can focus on the experience being reflected on, and to think slowly and carefully. Beyond these, I may add that it is important to accept temporary discomfort and to consider that change may be needed. I want students to know that genuine reflection can sometimes mean confronting "hard truths," such as "I didn't give this my best shot" or "I let someone else down."

Another strategy for teaching them the *how* of reflection is to share an established model of reflection. You

**"In the past, I just told students to 'reflect' and I assumed they would know what to do."**

might use Ash and Clayton's (2009) Describe-Examine-Articulate Learning (DEAL) model. Another good choice is the What? So What? Now What? model by Rolfe et al. (2001).

Over the years, I have developed a simple model of my own—a way for students to understand how reflection differs from mere recall or description. I compare reflecting after an experience to discussing a movie. After viewing a movie, a student could summarize the plot—tell me what happened and who did what. That is a description. Or they could write a review of the movie. They could talk about how it affected them, what meaning they took from it, what its strengths and weaknesses were. That is a reflection. I tell my students to avoid plot summary and reflect instead. Put more focus on the *why* and the *how* and less on the *what*, *who*, and *when*.

### Implications and Next Steps

In the past, I just told students to “reflect” and I assumed they would know what to do. That often was not the case. I have come to understand that, though reflection is not incredibly complex, reflection has a richness to it and it is a skill. Now, I invest half of a class period in teaching students the *what*, *why*, and *how* of reflection. This is a small investment that really pays off. My students reflect more effectively, and they do so earlier in the semester. They can make better use of my feedback about their reflections because we have laid the groundwork in advance. It is a skill set that they can carry with them into future course experiences. ■

### References

- Anderson, A. D., Hunt, A. N., Powell, R. E., & Dollar, C. B. (2013). Student perceptions of teaching transparency. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 13(2), 38–47.
- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection for applied learning. *The Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, 1(1), 25–48.
- Ribeiro, L. M. C., Mamede, S., Brito, E., M. Moura, A. S., Faria, R. M. D., & Schmidt, H. G. (2019). Effects of deliberate reflection on students' engagement in learning and learning outcomes. *Medical Education*, 53(4), 390–397.
- Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D., & Jasper, M. (2001). *Critical reflection in nursing and helping professions: A user's guide*. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Ryding, J., & Wernersson, I. (2019). The role of reflection in family support social work and its possible promotion by a research-supported model. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 16(3), 322–345.